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ABSTRACT

The concept of rhetorical community is employed in this paper as a starting point for the study of community. Since the clarity of the concept "rhetorical community" is insufficient for purposes of building theories, the paper offers a more precise conceptual definition: a rhetorical community is a group of people who identify themselves with a common rhetorical vision (symbolic reality) that gives them a common goal and sense of purpose by which they organize their actions. Based on systems theory, the paper proposes this model of rhetorical community as a necessary step toward constructing a theory of community based upon communication processes. Suggestions are offered for studying rhetorical community from both rhetorical and ethnographic approaches. (RL)

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THE CRITICAL STUDY OF RHETORICAL COMMUNITY:
APPLICATIONS FOR A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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The Critical Study of Rhetorical Community:

Applications for a Conceptual Model

Communication scholars working with the concept of community face one problem immediately. Community is not merely replete with sense; it is menacing, bloated and gorged with senses. We face many assertions of what community is, most of which contend that communication has something to do with it.¹ How can we determine what that something is? One valuable approach is to investigate how various communicative activities influence people's sense of membership in a community; these data will suggest that a sense of relationship, of sentiment, is contingent upon certain rhetorical opportunities and activities made possible through identifiable channels and networks. An alternative approach is to begin with the conceptual tools available for critical work to see whether they can forge coherent explanatory systems of the rhetorical processes in which social order arises, takes form, and changes.

In this paper I shall concern myself with the bloated parts of the concept community. My goal is to suggest how, by beginning with the concept of rhetorical community, we might make valuable contributions to understanding certain rhetorical processes underlying social collectivities. I address three questions. First, how can rhetorical community and its appendages--fantasy themes, types, and rhetorical vision--become more than critical tools? Can closer examination make them valuable concepts for explaining the processes in which dramatization structures social relationships and gives them purpose? Second, how might rhetorical theorists and critics contribute to our understanding of community? And third, what contributions might the interpretive social sciences make by working with the conceptual tools of dramatic action?

Developing a Model of Rhetorical Community

I find three reasons for beginning with Bormann's² work. First, he addresses the issue of community through his term "rhetorical community." The concept is clearly involved with rhetorical activities, identification, and the potential for collective action; it provides a starting point for examining what the relationship between communication and community might be. Second, while Bormann has not emphasized community, we should see how his lexicon can be stretched beyond its original purpose. Third, his is a relational approach to community; it emphasizes the special bonds that unite some persons and which differentiate them from others.³

Dramatistic perspectives are concerned with the rhetorical functions and processes which bond people. Bormann begins with the notion of fantasy, developing the critical method of fantasy theme analysis. Duncan⁴ builds upon Burke the construct a "sociodramatic model of symbolic action as social action."⁵ Duncan's work addresses the structure of social order and the functions drama serves in the development and maintenance of that structured social order. While he identifies a wide range of rhetorical activities and their functions, he does not delve into the processes by which those activities fulfill their purposes--to create and sustain social order. A closer investigation of the uses of fantasy themes in argument may provide insight into how those processes obtain. We must first look at the concepts of rhetorical community and rhetorical vision.

A rhetorical community is defined by those who "chain in" or identify with a rhetorical vision. According to Bormann, a rhetorical vision is the product of "composite dramas which catch up large groups of people in a symbolic reality."⁶ It is constructed of fantasy themes that have chained out and it contains dramatic figures and typical plot lines. Offering the colonial Puritans'

view of the world as a rhetorical vision, Bormann asserts that "such a vision gave to every social and political action a sense of importance. . . (It) also gave meaning to each individual in the movement."⁷

Thus, a rhetorical vision gives a group a sense of purpose in a super-ordinate goal by portraying the benefits of following a certain course of action and by using particular criteria to interpret events in the everyday world. Duncan also identifies this rhetorical function of drama. Drawing upon Burke's notion of salvation, he secularizes deep belief in ultimate functions. "The value, purpose, end, or goal of any act is 'beyond' reason in the sense that no one before he acts can really 'prove' that a specific end will follow from certain means. . . But lack of proof has little effect on belief, for we use our belief in the end or purpose of an act to organize action in the present."⁸

The criteria community members use for interpretation have significance to the extent they identify particular relationships and causal forces in the world, and adhere to particular rules of social organization among themselves. Individuals are bound together into a community by certain rules of relationship that make sense only when viewed in the context of working toward some goal. The vision must present a clear picture of the kind of goal being sought, and of how the efforts of individuals and other forces influence the likely attainment of that goal. Since the vision is a guide for living in the fullest sense,⁹ it will also provide the criteria for commentary upon the here-and-now events of the community.

A serious problem arises when we look at the criticism that has been based upon fantasy theme analysis. Here we find rhetorical community applied to a formal organization,¹⁰ to the subset of a formal group that shares a vision,¹¹ to a movement or organization,¹² and to the supporters of a presidential candidate.¹³

This diversity of application has contributed to the bloating effect now suffered by the term community, generally, and by the term rhetorical community, specifically.

In previous work,¹⁴ I argued for a more rigorous, systematic treatment of the lexicon of fantasy theme analysis to develop a model of rhetorical community. The purpose of the model is to investigate the uses and consequences of drama in argument for the community. I apply the label of rhetorical community to one of two naturally occurring social systems that generates dramas, uses dramas, and is influenced by dramas generated by others. My arguments proceed in the following manner:

1. Rhetorical community and rhetorical vision have been used inconsistently.
2. The inconsistency is due to a lack of concern regarding the kind of goal which is the organizing stimulus for the collectivity.
3. Fantasy theme analysis concerns the rhetorical criticism of social reality, yet we are unsure what we mean by social reality.
4. Social reality can be sorted into lasting understandings of events past, social rules, and symbolic processes, and into ad hoc interpretations of fleeting events that, in a sense, intrude upon the pursuit of some superordinate goal. We can speak of enduring social reality and ephemeral social reality.
5. Rhetorical community and rhetorical vision pertain to superordinate goals located in enduring social reality. The community members are bound together by their long-term pursuits focused upon issues of value, relationship, and style of life.
6. Individuals also coalesce around goals of terminable concern. These collectivities are similar to, but not identical with, rhetorical communities, since their goals are based in ephemeral social reality. Instead of rhetorical community, the label should be rhetorical bloc. Instead of creating a rhetorical vision, the bloc generates a rhetorical depiction. A rhetorical bloc has a rhetorical depiction based upon dramas of ephemeral social reality.
7. Since community and bloc are naturally occurring social systems, they are amenable to study from a systems perspective.

8. Community and bloc systems may operate independently of each other, but they may also engage in interdependent rhetorical activity to advance their own goals. They become interdependent to the extent that they exchange or draw upon each others resources--in this case, dramas.
9. We should examine both the internal and linking processes of the two systems. How they are linked will influence how their internal rhetorical processes are directed. By assessing the linkage, how each system uses (or is used by) the other system's dramas to influence goal attainment, we can infer the systemic function being met: controlled growth, system maintenance, structural change, or system decay.

The model that resulted from this line of argument has seven major terms. Rhetorical community, rhetorical vision, and enduring social reality constitute one conceptual cluster. Rhetorical bloc, rhetorical depiction, and ephemeral social reality constitute another. The seventh major term is memory. Simply put, systems have memories in which information is stored. For rhetorical communities or blocs, that information is the composite of dramas that constitute the vision or depiction, respectively. In each system's memory is a pool of dramas that a rhetor may draw upon to create a version of a vision or depiction. A community and a bloc are interdependent to the extent that a rhetor draws upon dramas stored in the other system's memory.

The model concerns the question of how two systems are interdependent. In other words, what function in argument does the appropriated or imposed drama serve for the system? Toulmin's typology¹⁵ is useful insofar as different uses of dramas in systems' rhetorical processes have different systemic implications.

1. Dramas used as Data: In this mode of linkage, fantasy is appropriated to serve as evidence. One system draws upon another's dramas to achieve a goal (a claim) of its own. The systemic function of controlled growth/evolution is served here.
2. Dramas used as Warrant: A bloc may appropriate a community's dramas to serve as the underlying value or principle upon which the bloc's argument rests. To the extent that an audience finds the basis for the argument acceptable, the bloc furthers its own cause, serving the systemic function of controlled growth/evolution. A community has established values, rules and principles of its own for use in argument; it would not draw upon a bloc's resources for this systemic function.

3. Dramas used as Claims: Both a community and a bloc have their own goals, their own claims to make. No linking would occur for this purpose.
4. Dramas as Backing: Appropriating dramas for backing serves to legitimize the system's mode of interpretation, since backing certifies the selection of a particular warrant. This "shoring up" procedure serves a system maintenance function, morphostasis.
5. Dramas used as Rebuttal: One system imposes its dramas upon another's argument for rebuttal in an attempt to place limitations upon, or to refute, the warrant. Placing limitations on the warrant works to change the structure of the system. Complete refutation of the warrant introduces entropy into the system to cause the system to decay.

Community as a Rhetorical Study

The model is, of course, optional equipment for anyone wishing to investigate rhetorical community. It does allow the investigator to focus upon a specific range of issues and questions: system boundaries, modes of interdependence and the consequences of the interdependence for internal rhetorical processes.

Defining the boundary of the system is crucial. Both community and bloc are flexible terms. They are analytic, not empirical; as such, their value is measured by the quality of insights afforded through their use. System boundaries are arbitrarily defined as a function of the purpose of the analysis.¹⁶ The precision with which the system boundary is defined is contingent upon the researcher's question; precision has sense only when viewed in the context of some use.

A community or bloc may be of variable size; it may or may not be tied to a geographic location. A rhetorical community may be small and isolated (e.g., the Hutterite sect). It may bear close resemblance to a massive political entity (e.g., the American people). If we choose, we can apply our conceptual definition of community to a neighborhood ethnic enclave; as cultures define community, so can subcultures, countercultures, or cultural pockets in cities.

The issue at hand is the basis for organizing. Is the underlying organizing stimulus of the group based in enduring social reality, and thus

tled to a superordinate goal, with all its implications for living life in "the fullest sense?" Or is the organizing stimulus located in ephemeral social reality? Once determined, the community researcher can next address the question of precision as it relates to the system boundary; which persons repeatedly chain in to dramas implying rules of relationship, and asserting the causal forces at work, the dramatis personae, and the goal of the community?

Gronbeck¹⁷ states that fantasy theme analysis is "primarily a critical tool for analyzing verbal discourse and mental constructs rather than an explicitly developed theory of human communication and social systems." The challenge of developing a sociodramatic theory--with all the implications for hypothesis testing and prediction--is imposing. My model places one approach to sociodramatic discourse in a systems perspective. It draws our attention to two types of issues. How do rhetorical systems become interdependent to further their own goal seeking? And how does the manner of that linkage influence the internal sociodramatic processes of the system?

Examining the linkages in drama between systems is essential. Organizing activity occurs in response to external pressures. Focusing upon linkages between systems may help shed light on those external pressures. As I have identified the two types of systems, their goals differ; they might have differing rhetorical needs which could be best met through different types of linkages. We may find, for example, that blocs generally draw upon community dramas more for their own controlled growth, to further their short-term objectives. Communities may generally draw upon bloc dramas only for system maintenance work, reasserting their legitimacy and reinforcing their warrants. Deviations from observed patterns of linkage may indicate serious internal problems.

While the model is developed from concepts of fantasy theme analysis, it is not bound to identifying fantasy themes and noting their origin. One value

of fantasy is in understanding the generative symbolic mechanisms which give rise to social systems and which may link social systems. We can also investigate the uses of major symbolic forms, universal rhetorical strategies.¹⁸ Will blocs and communities engage in these strategies similarly to address similar appearing exigencies? Is a rhetorical bloc simply a lower level version of rhetorical community, analogous to it in its adaptive rhetorical processes? Or will the different generative impulses and needs of community and bloc have implications for their selection of strategies? for their labeling exigencies that, to the outside observer, appear similar?

Creps¹⁹ writes of the need for a community to reconcile the fact of evil with the presumed security it should give its members. He identifies strategies in which the community can define evil, prepare for action against it, and transcend it. Community researchers might begin to examine how these symbolic forms rely upon linkage with other systems. Brummett's²⁰ analysis of San Francisco Mayor Alioto's scapegoating the Death Angels as the evil in the "Zebra" murders indicates one form of linkage. Alioto linked his Bay Area rhetorical community with that of the Death Angels for the purpose of system maintenance. This observation raises the question whether scapegoating is the most effective symbolic form for system maintenance work when a community is beset by entropic forces. Does the need to engage in linkage reveal a weakness in the community? Does the community have in its own "memory" the resources to deal with the exigency? Given the option of contending with the exigency relying solely upon internal resources or through linkage, what are the systemic implications of the eventual decision?

Garreau's recent book, The Nine Nations of North America,²¹ provides one potentially fruitful vantage point for examining rhetorical community. Garreau

argues that due to diverse geographic, climatological, economic, and demographic realities, distinct value systems have developed throughout North America. These value systems have produced identifiable and often conflicting nations; these nations have their own regional interests and priorities that reflect their particular views of what in life is important, is expendable, and is worth striving for. Each nation has its own cluster of dramatizations of the world--its own system memory. Finally, these nations bear little resemblance to the political boundaries of the map, as their names suggest: MexAmerica, Ecotopia, The Empty Quarter, The Breadbasket, Quebec, New England, The Foundry, Dixie, and The Islands.

If Garreau's insights are correct, and I sense that he is at least partially correct, then his nations correspond to rhetorical communities. These communities afford a fine opportunity for describing and criticizing the growth, stabilization, change, and demise of rhetorical systems. How, specifically, does fantasy focus people's communal identification with a vision and superordinate goal? When communities are antagonists, do they draw only upon their own rhetorical resources, or do they engage in some form of linkage with the opposing community? or with a third community? And if they do become interdependent, what is the nature of the linkage and what is the influence of that upon the community's internal processes? What form of linkage underlies cooperative efforts or coalition formation? And what sociodramatic forces lead people to abandon one community's vision for another's (whether they emigrate or not)?

These questions can be managed since many of these communities, while distinct, are within the same political unit. This fact was prominently displayed at the recent meetings among the provincial ministers in Canada to discuss revision of their constitution. By comparison to the United States, provincial ties to the central government are loose. Consequently, each "nation" is far freer to

pursue its own rhetorical community's vision and prerogatives, to the extent that community boundaries coincide with provincial boundaries.

In the United States, the critic can look to several political units that encompass conflicting rhetorical communities. Garreau sees California as one political unit in which reside elements of three nations: Ecotopia, MexAmerica, and The Empty Quarter. The controversy over the Diablo Canyon nuclear reactor appears to be a conflict between Empty Quarter and Ecotopian visions. How do the rhetorical blocs on both sides of this issue generate the rhetorical resources to fulfill their objectives? What sort of linkage do they engage in with the various rhetorical communities within the state boundaries? What linkages are they failing to develop which could help their own system's growth and introduce entropy into the opposing rhetorical bloc?

Community as an Ethnographic Study

According to Boyte, a political theorist and activist, we are in the midst of a revival of community efforts on the local level.²² This revival is in response to the intrusion of large scale institutions, both public and private, into the daily lives of individuals. The small scale community action efforts throughout the country are designed to gain back the control private citizens need to pursue their personal versions of the community's vision unimpeded.

We can study how impulses both to coalesce around issues and to act take form. Boyte asserts that this activity occurs in "free spaces," and it is precisely into these safe havens--neighborhood taverns, porches, backyard gatherings--that ethnographic study takes the community researcher. "If people are at times hemmed in by their social networks, it is through them that they make contact with the broader world; if people fear to rebel 'because of what the neighbors might say,' mass movements normally come when neighbors embolden each other to take action and seek change."²³

Boyce's observation finds support in systems theory literature and in Bormann's explanation of community formation. Natural systems create themselves in response to some form of challenge from the environment. Bormann suggests the same impulse; individuals who are dissatisfied with their condition begin to represent their social reality dramatically, using *dramatis personae* and plot lines to identify good and evil, to define their plight, to give shape to their struggle, and to create a scenario in which they can prevail. In other words, collective community action has its incipience when individuals begin to discuss how the broader world, generally in the persona of governmental or corporate bureaucracy, intrudes upon their lives. When goal seeking is frustrated, people often generate fantasies. Examining the role of fantasy in giving form to dissatisfactions in neighborhood safe havens becomes a worthy task.

While we can identify the dramas that characterize dissatisfactions, we must also try to discern how these dramas fit an interpretive framework for making sense of action in the outside world. Consensus upon a dramatic interpretation of events is crucial to any social fusion. Fantasy concerns the content of dramas that chain out, but the style of discourse defines a dramatic interpretation of the salient features of the action under discussion. As Jacobs and Laufersweiler note, "Any argument, and interpretation, and any moral judgment must be cast in terms of categories which presuppose some drama."²⁴ A dramatic perspective enables observers and participants to structure the problematic event; this structuring provides cues for acting, for attitudes towards the characters and issues in the event, for locating motives and for developing personas for key participants. While fantasy concerns the dramas used in life, the interpretive framework concerns the labeling (often implicitly) of a particular drama of life.

Studying the metaphorical basis of discourse may be valuable in determining how an interpretive framework develops. Metaphors allow us to understand and experience one thing in terms of another; they give shape to our conceptual system, and subsequently, they influence how we interpret action in the world. Lakoff and Johnson²⁵ assert that our fundamentally metaphorical concepts "govern our everyday functioning. . . (they) structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities."

A community researcher might venture into a safe haven, such as a neighborhood tavern. The first job is to locate what problems from the broader world are intrusions for the local residents. Next, the researcher could focus upon the activity of dramatization. What fantasies are generated? Which catch on? Who are the dramatic figures and how are they characterized? What appear to be the dominant causal forces in the dramas? Finally, the researcher could turn to the question of the metaphoric nature of the concepts in use.²⁶ If the dramas focus upon arguments between the key dramatic figures, what is the significance of casting the dramas in terms of argument? How does it affect the interpretive framework of the conversants? The researcher might see that the discussion hinges on the relationship of argument to war. Lakoff and Johnson indicate that our language use reflects this association. We win or lose arguments, we have an opponent, we attack and defend positions, and we plan and use strategies. Understanding this combative approach to the intrusion from the outside world may enable the researcher to see why certain of the fantasies catch on and why other fall.

Final Comments

One of the most intriguing questions we can ask is through what rhetorical processes do small scale, short-term-objective groups, rhetorical blocs, evolve

into legitimate rhetorical communities. We appear to be observing this very evolution in Poland. Solidarity formed to redress specific work-related grievances. We can easily imagine dissatisfied workers discussing and dramatizing their plight, finally realizing that collective action is the only remaining option. Throughout its existence, Solidarity has acted like a magnet, attracting a widening range of issues and dramatizations to it; the members of Solidarity now engage in dramatization of issues such as freedom of assembly, press, religion, personal expression, and freedom from want.

I believe that Solidarity is now more than my conceptual definition of a rhetorical bloc; it is on the verge of becoming a fully articulated rhetorical community. Its relatively limited goals have been attained; its members are articulating a vision. In the words of one union leader, "I have the feeling that I'm participating in a rally in Moscow or St. Petersburg in 1917 when Lenin exhorted the workers' councils and soldiers to take power. We are realizing the slogans that the human race has been waiting for . . . We are not a trade union . . . We are an opposition sociopolitical movement."²⁷

The power to make this bold public statement arose first through discourse in private, in safe havens. As Boyte states, mass movements emerge as neighbors embolden each other to action. Perhaps--just perhaps--by developing, refining, and elaborating the communicative constructs of rhetorical community and rhetorical bloc, we can appreciate a little better the relationship between dramatized discourse in private and unifying discourse in public.

Footnotes

¹ George A. Hillary, "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement," Rural Sociology, 20 (June 1955), 118-119. Also see Robert J. Doolittle, "Community Viewed as a Communicative Construct," paper presented at the SCA Convention, San Francisco, December 1971.

² Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (December 1972), 396-407.

³ Joseph R. Gusfield, Community: A Critical Response (New York: Harper and Row, 1975). Gusfield weighs the merits of a relational approach to defining community.

⁴ Hugh D. Duncan, Symbols in Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). H.D. Duncan Communication and Social Order (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁵ Hugh D. Duncan, Symbols and Social Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), vii.

⁶ Bormann, "Fantasy," 398.

⁷ Bormann, "Fantasy," 402.

⁸ Duncan, Symbols in Society, 110.

⁹ In "Fantasy," Bormann addresses the implications of a vision for a community member. "When a person appropriates a rhetorical vision he gains with the supporting dramas constraining forces which impel him to adopt a life style and to take certain action" (406).

¹⁰ Bormann, "Fantasy," 402.

¹¹ Bormann, "Fantasy," 403.

¹² Bormann, "Fantasy," 405-406.

- ¹³ Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (April 1973), 143.
- ¹⁴ Peter Ehrenhaus, "A Conceptual Model of Rhetorical Community," paper presented at the CSSA Convention, Chicago, April 1981. Reprinted in ERIC.
- ¹⁵ Stephen E. Toulmin, The Uses of Argument (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).
- ¹⁶ Richard V. Farace, Peter R. Monge, and Hamish M. Russell, Communicating and Organizing (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1977). See especially Chapter 3.
- ¹⁷ Bruce Gronbeck, "Dramaturgical Theory and Criticism: The State of the Art (or Science?)," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 44(Fall 1980), 324.
- ¹⁸ Most prominent among theorists of symbolic forms is Kenneth Burke. See especially Counter-Statement (1931; rpt. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1968) and The Philosophy of Literary Form, 3rd ed. (1941; rpt. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1973).
- ¹⁹ Earl Creps, "Rhetoric, Community, and Evil," paper presented at the CSSA Convention, Chicago, April 1980.
- ²⁰ Barry Brummett, "Symbolic Form, Burkean Scapegoating, and Rhetorical Exigency in Alioto's Response to the 'Zebra' Murders," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 44 (Winter 1980), 64-73.
- *** ²² Harry C. Boyte, The Backyard Revolution (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).
- *** ²¹ Joel Garreau, The Nine Nations of North America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
- ²³ Boyte, Backyard, 26.
- ²⁴ Scott Jacobs and Charles J. Laufersweiler, "The Interactional Organization of Witnessing and Heckling: An Ethnographic Study of Rhetorical Discourse," paper presented at the CSSA Convention, Chicago, April 1981. Quote on p. 3.

²⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1980). Quote on p. 3.

²⁶ For an example of metaphor analysis, see Susan Koch and Stanley Deetz, "Metaphor Analysis of Social Reality in Organizations," paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Minneapolis, May 1981.

²⁷ James M. Markham, "Risk of Success Gives Pause in Poland," New York Times, 23 August 1981, Sec. IV, p.2.